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ABSTRACT

"Infralanguage," a non-verbal channel of communication, exists within daily conversation. Two divisions of "infralanguage" have been identified: the non-stated thematic, that is, themes presented in topics of discourse; and the sequence of those themes within conversation. This unspoken communication is implicit and ubiquitous in parent-child interactions as well as classroom dynamics, delivering "deafening messages" of what is important and acting as a powerful socializing agent. (KS)

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INFRALANGUAGE: A NONVERBAL AGENT OF SOCIALIZATION

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"INFRALANGUAGE: A NONVERBAL AGENT OF SOCIALIZATION"

by

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ABSTRACT

The paper concerns itself with the nonverbal language related aspect of communication. The thesis is that there exists a nonverbal channel of communication within daily conversation that can be referred to, in Regan's term, as "infralanguage". Two divisions of "infralanguage" are identified, the non-stated thematic and sequence of topics mentioned in conversation. It is the authors' contention that "infralanguage" is implicit and ubiquitous in parent-child interaction and acts as a socializing agent delivering, in Regan's term, "deafening messages" of what is important (J.S.C. and E.C.).

Language plays a key role in the child's development of a world view in part by providing parameters of the child's development of world view. Thus, the Whorfian hypothesis applies also to the ongoing discourse of the home and the classroom.

Language is one mode of communication that humans acquire. It consists of both verbal and nonverbal channels. The verbal consists of the usually listed components on the lexical, morphological, and syntactical levels. The nonverbal consists of proxemics, gestures, kinesics, paralanguage, and yet another component which might be referred to as "infralanguage", to use Regan's term.

"Infralanguage" is a nonverbal channel of communication adding another dimension of reality to what is said in conversation. Two divisions of "infralanguage" have been identified: the non-stated thematic, that is, themes presented in topics of discourse, and the sequence of themes in topics. "Infralanguage" is always present in conversation; it is implicit and acts as a socializing and enculturating agent delivering messages that tell a child what is important and what is attended to in his linguistic contextual environment. The particular setting to be considered here is the classroom. The following is an example of a non-stated theme in the classroom.

Where is knowledge? Who possesses it? How can it be obtained? Consider a classroom where the teacher is searching for a specific answer and students are trying

different strategies in an effort to find the specific answer required by the teacher.* The students are frustrated in their efforts, and finally the teacher gives them the specific answer sought. The bit of knowledge sought is now found. Underneath this search, a more critical message and a second reality was being transmitted: a) the teacher is the possessor of knowledge, b) to acquire knowledge, the teacher must initiate the search with a question, and then c) students must guess. At some point this has gone on long enough, and the teacher then hands out that bit of knowledge.

A second component of "infralanguage" is sequence-- a) what is discussed, and b) in what order? When an acquaintance was a teenager, if he asked permission to go to a party, his parents would have a set of questions: 1) Who is going to be there? 2) Will the parents be home? 3) Will there be any drinking? 4) How will you get there? 5) What time will you be home? A wrong answer at any point in the sequence would end the discourse (and he would not be going to the party). Inherent in the sequence of topics referred to above is what his parents thought was important, what they attended to.

A less obvious example is that of a youngster who is with his parents for an afternoon drive on the weekend. The parents look at the scenery, talk and point out certain aspects of areas that they pass through. They look

*See John Regan, "Metaphors of Information", paper to Wenner-Gren Foundation, Symposium Semiotics of Culture and Language, Burg Wartenstein, 1975.

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at some things and comment on others. Some observations are about specifics and others are about the general. The discourse may sometimes point out how things look or how they work. All this is noticed implicitly by the child: the sequencing of the themes referred to and the themes referred to by the topics discussed.

Another more obvious example can be seen in the classroom. In a given classroom, a structuring sequence might consist of taking roll, making announcements, collecting homework, making assignments, and lecturing or discussing. Again the sequencing of these events draws attention to what the teacher considers important when and where in sequence an important consideration is placed. The sequence is not right or wrong--the point here is that whatever the sequence in discourse or conversation might be, it is carrying a nonverbal message that indicates what is important to the individual--a first, second, third act. It may be, of course, that it is the final item that is the significant one.

"Infralanguage" is a ubiquitous, implicit message in interaction that acts as an agent of socialization and enculturation. Through it can be transmitted messages concerning what is attended to, what is noticed, and what is considered important.

"Infralanguage" is, as Regan proposes, a language that all have heard but have not recognized--a language of socialization and enculturation composed of levels of

choices made unconsciously and as he says:

...the implications of the choices which are exposed to children in the undercurrent of dialogue present deafening messages to their minds even though these messages are contained in the silence of unnoticed comments.

It is understood that the amount of influence that the "infralanguage" has as an agent of socialization and enculturation has not been proven here; but its presence has been illustrated. The child attends to elements and to patterns found in language in both discourse and ordinary conversation and, thus, to the resulting "infralanguage". Even though the child may not appear to be listening to the surface talk, the child hears its inner forms that develop perceptions, that shape attitudes and values, which in turn contribute to the development of a particular world view in the child.

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